NUMBER

A MAGAZINE OF MODERN POETRY

. . . in this issue . . .

THE SOMBRERON

a Mexican drama

By B. Ortiz de Montelanno

Translated By Robert Barlow

Vol. I • Number 3

45 CENTS

We Kept on Reading "Tuesday" — and other poems

By ROBERT BARLOW

A group of poems by students of Mills College

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NOTE: Instead of appearing on a quarterly basis, "Number" hereafter will be published whenever enough material is gathered together which we consider of sufficient value. Holders of one-year subscriptions will receive four issues, and a two-year subscription will entitle the holders to eight issues.

Robert Barlow . . .

WE KEPT ON READING "TUESDAY"

The collapsing garden, the varnished bamboo green as
    a bug's underneath,
The chopped tassel of the banana,
Purple rotting to scarlet on one seceding leaf—
Ants like thoughts working within a wound,
Burying glass mummies in capsules,
All was suddenly shadowed from west.

Over so soon! There is no time
To write Harriet, or unclutter the calendar
Of days invalid, whose folly is no longer optional.
The sun, too long on the vine, drops down,
Column pines support (like Chichen's walls)
The parrot-colored lintel of the night.

Fish-eyes heaped up in a shell;
The skeleton-jointed stars hold the world.

EXPLANATION TO M.

Since I feared the flight or the fading
Of the flowers wavering in your eye
Or the bees in your nostrils twitching their wings,
I circled through the wheat of your thighs,
Under that copper and suspicious crab, the sun,
Like one who fears shadow, like one
Who has lost his keys or a ring.

THE LIGHTS OF SAN FRANCISCO

Their hundreds marching on the hills
Burning the dark for eighty years
Move not in space.
They are an infantry sent against Time
By his worst-wounded enemy.

Scarce is the border overrun of his blue forest,
Scarce is the violent wing of the sabre loosened
Against guards jolted with waking,
When the trend of the wave is apparent.
And those who are not rent may find in a while,
on the crumbled moon-regarded road, or in
the peopled hedge along it, worse-poisoned
arrows.

DAM

Under the sky's plain, on earth's plain
You have fenced in the bloom of curved water.
A jawbone specked with rust-roses, your
unnatural concrete
With the five petals extended where you permit.
But water knows many doors:
Where shadows are hammered in one turf
are more trees
Than all your workmen.

ADMITTANCE

That arrow is no legend.
Like the hand of the sunlight laid on me
Is your name; your mirror face.

Even your name, o barkless white oak,
Your publicly-said name.

WARNING TO SNAKE KILLERS

Queerly walking by a slow and pagan clock
Between the pyramid and church
The god was surprised and killed on the stair of his ruined shrine.
The Indian crushed the poison pod skull, he gathered the flowers
of the movable skin with a ten-cent knife and threw away thirty
tooth-colored bracelets,
But the stamen tongue wrote a symbol in red beads.

He dreamed that night that Tlaloc, in his heaven of the east
Peopled by those dead of dropsy, and all the colored shadows that
have looked into rivers,
Turned an eye within his serpent mask
To the messenger of the fourth rain-jar
And ordered mildew spread on all the village corn.

NOSTALGIA

That white tortilla on the metate of the night
Pounded and patted by autumn clouds
Comes to my soul's nose with four hundred flowers,
And I remember the soundness of corn.

METROPOLITAN FABLE

At that place
Where night is wedged between tulips on a hill
Comets clang down the doors and corridors.

Once at that place
The banana-colored valley and its oxen
And bronze-blooded men are a page turned over;
And the broom-flit shakes
Over the eyed lawn of your mind.
Conceal your lips:
The bat flings down in a web of needles
And the moon is gouged out of its colored peel.
Envelop your notebook in cheesecloth, I beseech you!
And see where among the columns uninvestigated,
Two velvet lobsters confer on the spelling of Babylon.

THE MASK

The angular green
Of a mask used in Benin
While black warriors banished from the compound
edge along a night-wide wall,
And comets eat the sky.

The black-breasted women
Herd about HIM.
He gestures
They are trees,
He postures
They are reeds
Spearing the sky of the river,
They are violent flowers on it,
Or teeth beneath the water.

The soft spider of his brain
Weaves rapid angles.
They are flies,
They are the elephant-tusked grove,
The elephant-trunked vine.

And he says "years"
And Johannesburg is cracked,
And he says "old stones sacred in the valley by the boys' hut"
"Christ whipped away like a melon-thief, or a wife-thief,
With his blood drooled on the ground,"
He says, "Oh, their silly hats, glass,
"Their women that never——"

The herd shrieks a laugh and
A tiger in a grove hesitates,
Losing a step of his intricate tread.

POEM

From this tree
No further fruit.
Search the boughs, look where the ant looks;
Only as cold-veined snakes knotting on the mud
Dagger their birdlike heads at a shadow
Will they respond.
A fire has bounded past,
And the bark is blistered.

TO ONE RESCUED

Dropped by the tiger, you whose wounds brim red
In a lace of torment
Where the fang pushed in and felt your arm-bone's shape inside
your arm,
Scattering the sinews, slackening the body's bow-cord:
Though the desert he dragged you through were fifty miles greater,
Though the day were fifty hours longer,
Would you call us with our antelope-hide shields,
Our clubs,
To break his low flower face
A second time?

SEBASTIAN

If only once
Arms had strained between hemp and bark,
And blood gone salt behind sewn lips,
Fifty vertical granite spires on the Norman coast
Or five hundred domes in Cairo and Sophia overscrawled with gold writing,
Could not sanctify Earth.
Her seeds would be blackened.

If only once
Eyes had beheld the desperate rolling of eyes
—And not in a fever men cure; but in a fever where cure is forbidden—
Had beheld the armored ants of pain exploring the marrow,
All the chrysanthemum-heavy mist,
Green-and-salmon,
Of the endless dynasty of Sung
Could not cover the spotted soil of the world.
Not the towers of New York with their knives of light upheld.
But this!

What fruit do you anticipate in the orchard of your arrows.
O likewise young soldiers?

(FOR E.) "QUE QUIERES? MIS COSTILLAS?"

More than the descent of star-dispersed kings
Down walls of Babylonia between leaves
Of palms and feet of ocelots and sheaves
Of conquered wheat and wailing offerings
Do I esteem your ribs, that breathing box
Filled with the jewels of air which feed the flood
Of tumbling pearls and rubies of your blood
And bone—that gate my hand unlocks
Inquiring not what seeds will blaze in root,
Which fold in failure, stunted by the night.

NOTE ON B. ORTIZ de MONTELLANO

Robert Barlow, the translator of *The Sombreron,* regarded B. Ortiz de Montellano—who died about two years ago—as perhaps the best of the Mexican poets. So far as we know, this is the first publication of any of his work in English.

It was probably Barlow's great affection for what was most characteristically Mexican which caused him to transfer into English the naivetes which he found so charming in the original, such as "Two live doves fly out. Try to keep them from staying on stage" . . . or "Night falls and a set of fireflies—which can be arranged by simple electrical means—distracts the bad thoughts of the spectator."

THE SOMBRERON

By

B. ORTIZ de MONTELLANO

Translated by Robert Barlow

THE CHARACTERS

The Sombreron's Mask
The Sombreron
The Woman
The Father
The Son
A Dog
The Spirit Which Is Inside the Earth

* * *

The Sombreron is a mysterious character of Maya Quiche myth, with supernatural erotic powers. In this theatrical venture he represents the virtues of fire. In the fragmentary legend, he is characterized solely by the use of an enormous woven straw hat (sombreron) with which, along with other elements (a Mexican mask and the slippery body of snakes which abound in tropical groves) he created his mortal figure for the stage.

The Spirit Which Is Inside the Earth might be Ah-Mucen Cab, of Maya myth; a name meaning "He Who Is Hidden Underground." In this farce he is arbitrarily represented by a face made from a thin balloon which gives it elastic movement, and a lone green glassy eye surrounded by tree-roots like an enormous land octopus.

The other characters, peasants of the southeast coast of Mexico, present no problems in their characterization.

The dialogue is serious and clipped. The action should be slow, with marked pauses and silences.

PROLOGUE

(The Sombreron's mask, representing the Devil, appears between the stage-curtains, without anybody holding it up. Behind the mask the speaker will be found.)

THE MASK:

Ladies and gentlemen: In order to appear before you properly I have cancelled my engagements with the witches and wizards. I prefer, however, to find in your faces surprise and not fear. I'll tell you: yesterday I had the pleasure of burning the last library, with all its eleven thousand Bibles and all the books of the demonologists, my calumniators. It's more difficult all the time to detect my presence, and as a consequence harder to mock me! Science and custom evolve, and Dr. Faust and La Celestma no longer need me, but I keep on living, and now I use a mask—you will observe it—I disguise myself, I do hocus-pocus, sleight-of-hand that no one notices. Anyhow, my business dealings were always cleaner than my intentions; I invented the bill of exchange and received souls with a rigorous inventory, even though they often deceived me. Now that everything is done with contracts and receipts, I've taken to juggling; I've turned from an honest man into a thief; I work by night and only the doctors keep their eye on me. However, I know that I am as deathless as death, and the instincts have always belonged to me.

Before I present you with the personages of this dark farce, since I am interested above all in those who know more through accident than age, I should like to give you some advice, if you will permit me: believe in dreams, in the efforts of poets and wise men, workers in the mines of my noisy silence, believe in wizards' laws more than in men's; and though what I say sound wrong and unreasonable to your ears, believe in the gods as you believe in money, in the Social Contract and speed. Believe in me also, and in my many masks; because there are days and nights in the life of every man and every women, when I rule with the same innocence with which a child always imposes its will, or with the wise sculptured stare with which the hypnotizer rules the person who, like myself, does not believe in him.

Have I insisted enough in this infantile attitude of faith to prepare you to accept the illogical happenings which you will shortly observe? Perhaps this may be the fabric of my discourse and the reason for which you will have to excuse my intrusion into your world.

SCENE ONE

(Exterior of a peasant hut in a wooded place among ravines. It is growing dark. The woman is kneading dough on the grinding-stone near the fire, while the son sharpens his hunting knife.)

WOMAN:
Don't you think you'd better get through sharpening your knife? It's dark now, and not safe to be outside.

SON:
In another moment, mother, before the tiger's eyes shine, it will be ready.

WOMAN:
. . . and your father hasn't come. Night will overtake him on the road.

SON:
He must be taking in the odor of the fireflies. He'll come soon. *(The dog enters barking furiously, and perhaps fearfully.)* And now what's the matter?

WOMAN:
Shadow-fright, or the full moon.

SON:
Couldn't the Sombreron be somewhere near?

WOMAN:
Be still, don't say it even if you think it is; if that One should come, your mother is in danger.

SON:
That is why my knife and I are with you.

WOMAN:
It is not that, my son; it's not that. You don't know what might happen to me! *(The dog howls uneasily.)*

SON:
Why, what danger are you in?

WOMAN:

I cannot tell you. *(The timbers of the house creak softly. The cloth of the wind rips.)*

SON:

Did you hear, mother? Did you? *(With his knife raised, he peers into the darkness of the wood.)* I'm going to look for this Follower, to see what he wants.

WOMAN:

(Restraining him quickly.) No, son! It's time for supper; we had better go inside.

SON:

But if it is the Sombreron, I must wait for him.

WOMAN:

No, no, I don't want you to suffer for me. Let's shut ourselves in, your father can't be long. *(The same noises. The dog runs away.)*

SON:

Then I will not leave you. . . . *(They enter the house. A darkening silence falls. Great shadows, as if of a bird's wing, cross the stage. Sound of rattles. At a bound the Sombreron lands on the stage, hunched and sinuous. His voice is deep and broken like that of boiling water.)*

SOMBRERON:

In the imperceptible hollow of the woman's shadow I shall rest! Next to the red flame, the tiger tongue licking the cold! I shall rest, watching, for the green stones are two, like men's eyes, and between them a slender cross rises! . . . My body divides the shadows to keep awake, and in my eyes there is no hollow for ashes. *(Curls around the fire in a circle.)* Phew! I shall rest, calcifier of stones, on the roots of all trees and the poison of all yellow serpents! *(Dragging himself toward the door of the hut, in a low and sibilant voice.)* Woman, voice of the dark well, bowl-breasted, my hands shall be the leaves of your dream and my eyes the eyes of your awakening! *(Darkness.*

Strange lights pass across the stage. The silhouette of the Sombreron, glowing, shines in the night. The curtain falls briefly: the night has passed. Little by little the dawn lights up the stage again.)

FATHER:

(He returns at daybreak to his house. He detects the Sombreron's presence, and cautiously draws near until he touches him with his foot.) Who are you? . . . What are you looking for in my house- viper or demon? . . . Answer, don't make me angry: what are you doing here? . . . Eh, silent one, reptile! Trunk without sap! Sloughing-off of the night! *(Strikes the motionless body of the Sombreron with his hatchet.)* Then you shall die, strip of vile and poisonous rag . . . Ah, knives shatter on your gummy body, and my anger is useless! . . . I'll throw you in the ravine, I'll shred you on the rocks, viper or demon! *(Lifts him and throws him violently, but a cloud comes down from the air and catches the Sombreron and carries him away. Rapid red lights make the scene shaky.)* Cursed devil! Cursed Sombreron, Lord of the Hill! . . . Again you escape my hands! Again . . .

WOMAN:

Pelucho! Pelucho! I was waiting for you. I'm so glad you're here. Do you know what's happened to us? *(Crying.)* Oh, what shall I do?

FATHER:

(In fear and rage.) Did you see him? Tell me . . . Did you see him?

WOMAN:

Yes . . . from only seeing him there were two . . . fallen from my breast.

FATHER:

Here now! Where are those children?

WOMAN:

Here in the house: I'll go bring them. *(Opens the door. Two live doves fly out. Try to keep them from staying onstage.)* Look at them, there go my little doves! Oh . . . oh, my children have gone now! Now I shall not see them again!

FATHER:
But what are you crying for? I'd have had to kill them anyway, because I don't want any of the Sombreron's children.

WOMAN:
Yes but they were mine . . . And now?

FATHER:
(After a silence.) Evil signs pursue us . . . The earth rejects us . . . We must leave this place.

WOMAN:
That's so, Pelucho; let us go away from this place.

FATHER:
(In the form of a prayer.) Those who know not, poor in vision and understanding, ah! they say naught. He who knoweth, joyously goeth in quest of the Flying Tiger. And then he returneth with him.

SON:
(Coming out of the hut.) Father!

FATHER:
Is it you, my son?

SON:
It is I, father.

FATHER:
Are you noble, my son?

SON:
I am, father.

FATHER:
What are your companions doing, my son?

SON:
Father, they are in the woods looking for the tiger. "There is no tiger," they said.

FATHER:
And at that moment, the tiger was prowling in front of them.

SCENE TWO

(A camp of broken branches. Afternoon light. The Mother and Son enter. The dog frisks about.)

WOMAN:
(Carries a bundle of faggots to the foreground and sits on it.) We have worked enough today! Let's rest.

SON:
Yes, mother; sit down a while. I'll finish the work.

WOMAN:
All right, son, don't be long. *(Pause.)* This place is nice, and so is our new house! With so many trees!

SON:
I like it too, and I'm happy away from the dangers we were in back there. *(Pause.)* Ugh, look how many toads!

WOMAN:
There are many of them here . . . for the snakes.

SON:
As the story says . . .

WOMAN:
Yes . . . the youth Tamazul turned into a toad in order to carry a message to the grandmother, and since he did not run fast enough, the snake swallowed him to carry him faster . . .

SON:
And since the snake didn't run very fast either, he let himself be swallowed by the eagle, who carried them flying to where the grandmother was. —I bring you a message, said the eagle, and coughed up the snake. —I bring you a message, said the snake and coughed up the toad. And inside the toad came the message from Tamazul.

WOMAN:
That's why snakes eat toads and eagles eat snakes. *(Pause. A rustling in the bushes. The dog goes off.)*

SON:
Mother, I think he hears something. I'm going to go and see what it is.

WOMAN:
Be careful, son, it's getting dark. *(The son goes offstage. Pause. The light thins. The dog comes back, and with a sad air, comes up to the woman.)* And you, what's troubling you? . . . Why do you hang your ears? *(The dog howls desperately. The light becomes dimmer.)* What can you be seeing? . . . the snake in the tree? . . . *(The dog howls and runs away.)* And Pelucho hasn't come . . . Nor the boy . . . *(Looks into the edge of the wood.)* Nothing . . . you can see nothing. *(Sits down again. Slow sound of rattles and of splitting boughs.)* The branches are breaking . . . *(Sudden light and the Sombreron leaps onstage. The woman screams and faints.)*

SOMBRERON:
(In a dark voice, which billows out like smoke.) Woman, tender ear of corn in the heart of my roadways! Like the new maize-ears wounded by the lightning of the hatchet . . . A necklace to your neck. I pursue you! Remember . . . they were not gods, because they did not tell what they loved, and you fear me because you do not listen to me . . . The word walks like lightning in the snake's mouth . . . So it was told to the deer and the birds. *(Coming near, until he touches the woman's body.)* My warmth turns the bodies of those who went away into worms. Gives life to your children . . . Slants in the lightning furrow and the sky's heart. You shall be a breath of water between my hands, for my eyes, for my mouth . . . thirsty . . . *(The woodcutters are heard returning. In the distance, the song which marks their steps, a song of the ancient Maya, grows louder. Hunched over, the Sombreron moves away.)* Enemies of the earth! Choppers down of Mother Ceiba and the red Zapote-tree! Enemies of my lair

of eternal leaves! Eh, Ja! Jay! Through the roots of all stones my sap shall push . . . at the feet of all trees my words shall spring forth, green and poisonous weeds. It is useless to look for the gem in the well. It is useless to find me. *(The Sombreron disappears into the hollow of a tree. Night falls, and a set of fireflies distracts the bad thoughts of the spectator. In the uncertain light of the fireflies—which can be arranged by simple electrical means—appear the shadows of the returning father and son.)*

SON:
(Seeing the Sombreron's shadow.) Get out of here, devourer! I am not afraid of your claws, nor of your teeth. My knife knows how to pierce vipers in the corner.

FATHER:
Is it you, my son?

SON:
It is I, father.

FATHER:
Are you noble, my son?

SON:
I am, father.

FATHER:
What are your companions doing, my son?

SON:
Father, they are in the woods looking for the tiger. "There is no tiger," they said.

FATHER:
And at that moment, the tiger was prowling in front of them.

SCENE THREE

(The stage is divided into two parts horizontally. The lower part should be the larger. Above, the wood, the tops of the trees lost above the line of vision. In the middle a large tree with a large hole. In the setting of the lower part the roots of the forest trees continue. We are going under ground, and the scene presents us with the cross section of the Sombreron's hiding place. The Spirit Which Is Inside the Earth, with his green eye and his many arms, tree-roots in motion, is with the Sombreron. The bottom part of the stage is illuminated by a live green light, the other remaining dark until the Father and Son appear, lighting it up with the yellow light of a hatchet.)

SOMBRERON:
(Mending the wings of a bat.) Don't get into any more trouble with the lovely Owl, brow of the shadows, who carries a scythe in his beak. *(The bat repeats this word constantly: quilitz, quilitz.)* I can't always be mending your wings with my magic glues, young bat. *(The changed tone of Sombreron's expressions should be no surprise, when we know that even such mystérious beings become human in moments of intimacy.)* And now you can fly to your caves . . . We shall see each other tomorrow when you bring the wind's whistle in your blow-gun. *(The bat escapes through the hollow tree still saying:* Quilitz . . . quilitz . . . *which may mean: Many thanks.)* Grandfather! *(To the Spirit Which Is Inside the Earth.)* The scent-pots are dry . . . the guanabana roots are fading and the fruit has lost its odor . . . the black-nippled sweet-potato and the jicama and the pitahaya and the red zapote need freshening from your hand. What are you doing, grandfather, that you should forget your slavery and your kingdom?

SPIRIT:
(Old man's voice.) I am old, and the winter is not long enough to rest in.

SOMBRERON:
But the bees still adorn your brow and your hair is rain.

SPIRIT:
Just as your hands hold the measurement of women's names, and the flint's heat, the Western Stone's heat.

SOMBRERON:
Have no care! I shall help you, grandfather . . . We shall invent fruits of my season.

SPIRIT.
When all the birds and all the butterflies dry out in the gourd . . . when all the bones I do not have turn into lime . . . then. *(The upper part of the stage grows light. First the Son enters. The Father follows him, carrying an enormous tree-trunk on his shoulders.)*

SON:
I found his footprints here, near this leafy tree.

FATHER:
This time he shall not escape. We are in his hiding place.

SON:
(Soft bat-flights and owl-songs are heard.) Do you hear the flight of the bat and the scream of the owl?

FATHER:
Yes, they graze right past me.

SON:
Here it is, father. The hole I made to see him is hidden behind the leaves. Here it is!

FATHER:
Help me then. *(They push with the tree trunk until they force it through to the back of the second scene.)*

SOMBRERON:
(Suddenly lighted up.) Who knocks on my door?

SPIRIT:
It is the man, with the hallucinations born of his power.

FATHER:
Did you sharpen the points of the flints well?

SON:

Yes, and I sank them deep into the trunk, like leaves of knives.

FATHER:

Then help me to crush the body of the Sombreron thoroughly. Push more on that side . . . like that . . . now inside . . . so it will fall heavily.

SOMBRERON:

Ja, Jay! Grandfather Ah-Mucen-Cab, Man wishes to discover everything: what lies behind the sky's gourd and what is scattered and burning in the earth's heart . . . Let him watch his morrow and his yesterday, because the white corn is his corn, and the yellow-backed bean is his bean!

SPIRIT:

Keep your rage behind your thought, and obey me. When the timeless trunk of Man falls, give an immortal cry so that they shall think you dead.
Now, to convince them, have the ants bear bits of your body on their shoulders, nails and hairs. *(The Sombreron fetches a long row of giant ants, tied by a cord; the ants will be almost as large as men.)*

SOMBRERON:

And the earth about me shall tremble!

FATHER:

Get your knife ready, son, and guard my back—the enchanter is going to die. Dig the ground until the hole is bigger. That's enough. . . . The trunk is slipping now . . . There it goes. *(The trunk falls, like a battering-ram. Deep underground noises and the cry of the Sombreron.) (Pause.)*

FATHER:

His death is certain . . . but this great silence. Son, put your ear to the ground and see what you can find out.

SON:

Nothing, more than the silence. He must be dead now. *(Through the hollow of the tree the giant ants come out, bearing bits of the Sombreron.)*

FATHER:

Be certain, son, be certain. *(Jubilant.)* The Sombreron is dead!

SON:

Look: the ants are carrying off his body.

FATHER:

What are your companions doing, my son?

SON:

Father, they are in the woods looking for the tiger. "There is no tiger," they said.

FATHER:

And at that moment, the tiger was prowling in front of them.

(A curtain of smoke hides the stage. At once, darting out of the smoke, the Sombreron's mask grins silently.)

CURTAIN

BARLOW BIOGRAPHY

Robert Barlow was born on May 18, 1918, in Leavenworth, Kansas. When he was fourteen years old he wrote his first letter to Howard Philips Lovecraft, the dean of modern weird fiction, and until Lovecraft died in 1937, Barlow received from him 105 letters and 54 postcards. In Lovecraft's will, Barlow, then only 19, was designated his executor.

Barlow never attended high school, but spent his time writing, and set up a small print shop, studied bookbinding, sketched and painted. In 1936 he studied at the Institute of Art in Kansas City, was encouraged by Thomas Hart Benton and won first and second prizes at the Florida State Fair exhibition in 1938.

In the winter of 1938-39 Barlow came to Woodstock, California, to work with Groo and Claire Beck in publishing small books . . . including the Commonplace Book of Lovecraft, a very rare item today. He hoped to found some sort of transcendentalist colony for publishing weird and fantastic literature. But in the spring of 1939 he gave this up and went to San Francisco.

About this time he began to be interested in archeology and in writing poetry. He continued his studies of anthropology and the nahuatl language and in 1943 began publishing with George Smisor the archeological journal Tlalocan. In 1944, he collaborated with Antonieta Espejo and Professor T. W. I. Bullock in the excavation of the Aztec ruins at Tlaltelolco, publishing monographs on the excavations.

In 1945 he was appointed by the Mexican government director of the Nahuatl project for the state of Morelos, holding classes in Indian villages to teach the Indians to read and write their own language. Also he began publication of news sheets in Nahuatl for the Indians.

In March 1946, he was elected a member of the Sociedad Mexicana de Bibliografia, and was given his first Guggenheim fellowship, so that he was able to continue his research and the publication of articles and monographs.

He was asked in 1948 to become the head of the department of Mexican anthropology at Mexico City College, and after some hesitation accepted. Always an individualist, it was impossible for him to follow a fixed college routine. By the summer of 1950 he was in a rather advanced state of nervous tension. At this time the Carnegie Institute of Washington was trying to get Barlow to accept a fellowship to go into the study of Maya language and culture, in which he was deeply interested.

When he locked himself in his room the afternoon of January 1, 1951, where he swallowed twenty-six Seconal tablets, he pinned up on the outside of the door a paper written in Maya: "Do not disturb me. I want to sleep a long time." He was found dead on the afternoon of January 2 by his secretary, Antonio Castanedo.

The foregoing was briefed from biographical notes about Robert Barlow made up by George Smisor, an associate in his archeological work.

In poetry, Robert Barlow worked with the Activist group for about five years. He began, as was characteristic, in the spirit of nonsense and satire, became seriously interested, then withdrew from a fuller exploration of poetic techniques because of an antipathy to discipline which he himself described as a kind of emotional claustrophobia.

Because of the excellence as well as the faults in his poetry, it is too bad that as a poet he was never able to come to terms with his resistances. The brilliance of the best of his lines indicates that if poetry had been more to Robert Barlow than a fascinating game which he did not dare take too seriously he might easily have become one of the most considerable of our contemporary writers.

Rosalie Moore . . .

ROBERT BARLOW AND THE MEXICANS

It was at a party that one seemed to see Robert Barlow at his most brilliant. The day that I resumed acquaintance with him in Mexico, talking together in the narrow book-and-bone infested study of his pink concrete house in Azcapatzalco, I thought "he seems very ill at ease—perhaps Mexico has changed him, perhaps I shouldn't have looked him up at all." But many times after that at parties I saw clearly that he was still our friend, and still the same Barlow.

Parties seemed to provide an expansive medium in which Barlow could swim about like some exotic fish, being himself all over the place—perhaps because this was a situation in which he could always get away. No one could ever quite follow him where his mind and wit would go. And when this would happen, when he would get away as it were, he would seem both exultant and lonely.

The difficulty was that it was not easy to get Barlow to make like a fish in this way, because he would never come to a party, if he planned to—or seldom. We invited him to many while we were in Mexico, and he always came the next night. He came in response to our invitation (though late) because he was very courteous and because he was our friend; also, I felt, he actually liked parties but could not bring himself to do anything so conventional as to keep an appointment precisely. It is, in fact, a Mexican convention not to keep an appointment precisely, so that he may have been assuming a conventional role in the Mexican view. At any rate it is certain that he was a kindly person who cared very much what people thought about him, and this made him very angry and the anger used to explode in amusing expletives and dances.

A number of our American friends were interested in meeting Barlow the archeologist (he was one of the best in Mexico at the time

of his death) or Barlow the poet, or Barlow the eccentric—(although to my mind his eccentricity was what you might call ornamental rather than intrinsic). So we planned for a party, keeping our fingers crossed. We wrote to Barlow that we had invited some Latin American poets who spoke almost no English, and were counting on him to interpret for us. That night, on schedule, he came.

The Latin Americans were extremely polite and charming as they always are, speaking in their halting English and refusing our hot rum drinks with a disturbing smile. It was winter in Mexico City and very cold, and we thought hot drinks would be nice. This was a mistake.

Barlow was sitting rather stonily beside a friend of one of the poets, a nice looking fellow, also Mexican, who was some sort of a scientist. Barlow listened to the polite small-talk of the Mexican group, not entering in, but staring straight ahead. He refused the rum drink also, and I remembered too late that I had never seen him drink anything but a certain brand of imported Spanish sherry, waving all else aside with his standard remark, "I disapprove of the minor vices."

Our American friends sat around the room stiffly, trying to think of the few things they could ask the Mexican guests which the Mexican guests would be able to answer.

Suddenly Barlow got up with a bone-rattling abruptness and saying something loudly in Náhuatl strode into the kitchen. He turned on the tap full force (in itself, a sin in Mexico as everyone is always saving water) and started to drink glass after glass right out of the tap— another defection; you are supposed to drink only Agua Pura out of a disinfected bottle. Moreover Barlow let the water faucet run, between glassfuls, and when this particular tap was on, it created a quake-like rumble that could be heard throughout the apartment.

Bill, my husband, went to Barlow in the kitchen and put his hand on his shoulder. "Temperance, temperance. You are going to pay for this tomorrow," he said.

"*I* know!" Barlow bellowed. "Do YOU know that – that FELLOW in there is making remarks about Americans? Nasty snide remarks? In Andalusian, under his breath?"

Bill turned off the tap. "But you are an expatriate. I didn't know you cared what anybody said about Americans."

"You don't get the point," Barlow replied. "THIS fellow is undoubtedly a biologist. I can't endure biologists."

By the time they came back to join the others, the party had somehow lost its glaze. Everybody was talking and laughing—the Americans and Mexicans were communicating with each other, by signs, by languages, by gestures, by boy-scout wigwags. Sometimes they looked as if they were acting out charades, but they were having a good time. They started to compete with each other reading their poetry out loud—that is, the Mexican poets, at my invitation, started to read and compete. It was very delightful.

Suddenly I found myself in a situation where there were no barriers—at least in so far as poetry is concerned. I found that the Latin-American poets were speaking my language about poetry, even if I could not speak their actual language very well. Through the hodge-podge of English, Spanish, charades and hand waving, I could tell this. There was no need to define terms, no need to explain what poetic tradition you belonged to. Everything we fight for and explain and defend they take for granted, and proceed from there.

"Naturally," Barlow said at this point; "I've been telling you this for years but you wouldn't come down." (To Mexico, he meant.)

At this point one of the poets read a poem that sounded, in the

Spanish, particularly impressive; those who understood were very moved by it, and even those who did not understand. I said, "If I could only understand . . . I *must* be able to really hear it." There was the poem still alive in the room from just having been read by the poet, and I couldn't understand it.

That was when Barlow took the poem away from the author and stood in the middle of the room, making gestures and translating it—image by image, picture by picture, the clear way it was written —without hesitation or stop.

Barlow had given the impression of the poem's having been created by him as he went along, and indeed in a way it was. We spoke of writing the translation down at once before it was forgotten, but Barlow refused.

After this incident, Barlow translated many Latin American or Náhuatl poems for us—always at parties—but I never could get any of these written, except one or two little songs in Náhuatl which I put down myself one night at some friends' apartment while a girl was playing a guitar and singing "Good Night Irene" at the top of her lungs.

But to get back to the party at our apartment, one of the Americans said to us on leaving, "Barlow is all you say. I don't like him, but he is everything you said he was. He is the poet Shelley and Walter Mittie and the Emperor Hirohito and some old bones dancing on an Aztec dyke."

"Why don't you like him then?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . maybe because he did all that on tap-water."

It was true that Barlow did seem to bring some sort of aliveness to bear on a situation, and though some people did not share our reaction, to us it always seemed most human (comfortable). It seemed to indicate some sort of awareness that unfortunately Barlow, like our guest, could bear to dispense with.

POEMS BY MILLS COLLEGE STUDENTS

Joaquina Ballard . . .

RECONCILIATION

He left the warm rectangle of door
Because of a principle, cape at his throat,
Invisible hawk on his arm.
Out of the house his strides
Into the snow half a mile
Before he remembered the century,
How flimsy a stick of principle was
To leave a fire for. Better to circle
Around again, perhaps if the door
Were not yet closed, a couple of words
Could wedge him in, let his feet
Become dry and forgotten, where
Only a window would know
The nightlong shame of the single going—
Pale blue footprints
Out in the glaze of midnight snow.

Mary Moores . . .

FROZEN EYE

Not shifting,
  The eye that stares at air.
Eye stone sealed,
  No slot to admit the green.
Yet kindness is an arch
    and temple of the eye
  Is to catch the orphan tear.

Marisu Mathew . . .

CONTEMPORARY POEM

Brown skin splits wide,
Green buds determine out,
Birds unpleat their sides.

Who alarmed the darkness,
Lit the clock,
Shed the shadow for the sun
And pulled on himself
The Spring?

Tilde Will . . .

NEW YEAR'S EVE

As waters have to run
And glass must break
You have to laugh and shout.

Scare forth the year
That you dislike, you are the one
It greets.

With dignity, I say,
With dignity,
While others yell,
I keep my face,
My chin, the bumper of the-days that come,
My heart in doubt vibrating, but not knowing . . .

Marie Vial . . .

MORNING EARLY

So catty a movement toward the sunlight,
Wagging willow follows
Like warning train's red eye,
Or like shuttle-cock
If the cock were stringed.

This blazon
Squeezed between bright leaves
On the warm-soaked stone:
Season of One.

Tilde Wil lived in Germany during the war, now lives in San Francisco. Joaquina Ballard's home is a cattle ranch near Winnemucca, Nevada. Marie Vial and Mary Moores both come from Portland Oregon. Marisu Mathew is from La Mesa, California.

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